The following transcript was provided to Archives and Special Collections by the Upper Swan Valley Historical Society with its associated audio recording.
Suzanne Vernon: Ed and June Underwood moved to the Swan Valley in 1939. Why?

Gerald Underwood: My dad had two trucks, and he was paid for hauling. He came to the Swan and got a load of lodgepole. Stan Ricketts was working for my dad at the time. Stan moved to the Swan and my dad moved here later. I don’t know just why they did.

SV: Ricketts place was the one up Rumble Creek?

GU: That was Tom Ricketts, Stan Ricketts’ brother. My dad knew the Ricketts quite well and they lived in the Bull Mountains out of Billings. There were three brothers. Johnny Ricketts was up the Bitterroot. Stan and Tom lived in the Swan. Just why they moved there, I don’t know.

SV: When did your folks get married?

GU: 1931 – somewhere in there. Bill was a couple years older than me. They were married in Billings. All of us were born in Billings. My dad built a tractor (?) with another guy, and he had a four-wheel trailer. They loaded all the stuff they owned in that trailer. They had an old car, an old square-looking car. I don’t know what kind it was. They had the back seat loaded up with I don’t know what all. My brother and I had to look out the back window all the time to see if my dad was still coming. I think we camped twice on the way up to the Swan. It was the middle of summer. My dad went to work some for the Forest Service. That winter I think he built furniture. Of course anybody who lived in the Swan had to be able to do a lot of different things to survive. There wasn’t nothing much for work, really.

SV: He must have liked the country. It was the 1930s. . .

GU: I don’t know what his skills were. He never talked much about why he came up there. He just came up there and liked it. He did have an opportunity to buy some land, I guess that was one of the reasons, to pay taxes on it. But when he got there, the people had paid the taxes on it. He didn’t buy it, and I forget just what place it was. When we first moved to the Swan, we lived on a place called the Arneson place, up Rumble Creek, and I think Bob Ford’s land was part of the Arneson place. A little old log cabin there, part of it was dirt floor. Then we moved to the Clinkingbeard place, which is where Dwayne Forder lives now. We lived there a couple three years. It was a nice place. We enjoyed it there. From there – 1942 – a lot of people left the
Swan. All the Wilhelm boys joined the Service. My dad was supposed to go in, but for some reason they didn’t take him. He went to work in Spokane as a carpenter. My mother worked out there also, but I can’t remember just what she did.

SV: What are some of your earliest memories of the time before you left the Swan?

GU: It was nice. We fished on Cooney Creek. Dad became quite good friends with Dobb and Ting Wilhelm, and Babe Wilhelm. They put up hay there on the Clinkingbeard place. They used horses.

SV: Did you help with that?

GU: We were pretty small. I started school at Smith Flat. Martha Anderson was my teacher in first grade. Then there was another lady, a young woman by the name of Miss Williams. She taught second grade and then we went on to . . . a little while in Bigfork, and Dad found us a place in Spokane and we moved there.

SV: Do you remember what you ate in those days?

GU: We ate a lot of venison. Canned venison. It seemed plenty. My mother canned a lot, everybody did.

SV: What about elk?

GU: My dad shot one elk when we were living at Swan Lake, and then he got a couple off of our place (1949-2006 they lived in the ranch on Pine Ridge Road) there, but that was later years. Mostly venison.

SV: What about wolves?

GU: No, we didn’t hear any wolves. Coyotes. I don’t remember any wolves.

SV: I’ve asked everybody but nobody seems to have any records. One fellow who lived up Glacier Creek behind the Swan River said he saw and heard wolves. And Val Gene Clothier told me that they used 1080 (poison) in the Swan in the 1940s, and that would have killed any wolves if there had been any.

GU: Well they did find a wolf on the ice at Swan Lake, Speck Lawrence. I remember they used to drive on the ice. It was a much better road in the wintertime. That wolf was mounted and in the largest store in Bigfork. Several years ago I read the inscription under the thing, and it was quite fabricated. (laughter) But that wolf, I think it had been poisoned.

SV: Your family had elk on your place?
GU: There were elk west of our place. It was pretty good hunting before they put the (Forest Service) roads in. It was pretty isolated for them. That road that came to Loon Lake (Kraft Creek Road) – it was pretty tough to get a car over.

SV: So there was a trail there?

GU: There was a place they called the Saterstrum place, right by Loon Lake? That’s where the road ended, but it was a pretty bad road. When I was a kid there was no reason to keep it maintained. Most people would cut the trees out of there to get into there.

SV: Mostly for hunting?

GU: I don’t know what reason. Everybody used to turn their horses loose, and they all ran on the west side, with bells on. When I was a kid, late grade school, when we moved back up to the Swan, I think that was 1949, we had horses and I’d go and catch them when we needed them. We would get a permit from the Forest Service and you could turn so many head of horses out.

SV: By 1949 do you remember what the changes were from when you had been there earlier?

GU: There was not a lot of changes. Missoula County maintained the roads much better than Lake County did. And then Koessler had opened the big mill at the Gordon Ranch, and Lee and Percy Wilhelm had a pretty good sized mill on the Lindbergh Lake Road, not far off the highway. My dad worked for Koessler at the Wineglass Mill. Did some work for him at the Gordon Ranch?

SV: Did you go to school at the Wineglass School?

GU: No. Two years I went to Smith Flats.

SV: I remember that your dad built the Wineglass School . . .

GU: Yes. I worked at the Gordon Ranch one summer and my dad worked at the mill. I didn’t pay much attention to what he was doing at the time.

SV: Did your dad build the houses there at the mill?

GU: Yes, Koessler wanted a mill with houses that could be moved. My dad, and John Stark helped him some, and they built these houses that could be put together to make a bigger one. There were quite a few people living at the Wineglass Mill.

SV: What were you doing at the Gordon Ranch?
GU: Putting up hay.

SV: Did they have a lot of stock?

GU: They had quite a few horses. They had some cows. They didn’t have a lot of stock. We put up hay. My brother drove a tractor that had a little mower on it. Then I drove a team of horses with a rake. They had a buck rake on a Jeep, and a beaver slide.

SV: They did use a beaver slide?

GU: Yes. They had several stacks out in the field. Bud Wolff was the manager at the Gordon Ranch then.

SV: Tony and Jim were just little guys when you were there?

GU: Yes. I guess both of them were there during the summer when I worked there. When we first moved to the Swan, Koessler lived there all year long, at the Gordon Ranch. (1939).

SV: They tried to make a go of it as a dude ranch?

GU: Well, that’s what it had been. A lot of people had worked there, packing. I don’t think they ran it as a dude ranch, more as a guest ranch. . . friends of Koesslers.

SV: Do you remember the Keewaydins?

GU: Yes, they were at the Holland Lake Lodge.

SV: Well, I was just thinking, you were a young man and here’s all these girls . . .

GU: Did we go up there? We did! (chuckles). They had a lady they called the old bell mare.

SV: Was she supposed to keep them all in line?

GU: Yeah, she did. My brother and this other kid drove up there and she about attacked them with a flashlight, chased them out of there! In fact when I came home on leave I worked for Woodhouse, he needed a wrangler for about a week. The job was to take these girls around on trails and stuff. I think there were maybe twenty of them. They were teenage girls. There were a couple of counselors with them. The counselors were, I spose, in their forties. This one woman had purchased the Keewaydin school, and they took the girls [camping] I guess.

SV: I contacted the Keewaydin organization, and the fellow that was writing the camp history said they couldn’t find any records of the Montana camps.

Gerald Edwin “Jerry” Underwood Interview, OH 422-208, 209, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
GU: They stayed at Holland Lake Lodge a couple of weeks, and then they came over and stayed with Copenhavers (Blackfoot Valley ranch). They went through the Bob Marshall.

SV: Tell me more about Babe Wilhelm and the Wilhelms.

GU: They were quite well known. Babe Wilhelm was pretty charismatic. Eva Wilhelm played the piano quite well. I liked Eva a great deal. I liked Babe, but after I spent part of a summer milking the cows, helping put up hay, I got to know Eva quite well and I really admired her. Babe was in the dude business, and he had a little sawmill. He opened a bar at Swan Lake, which was quite an event. It lasted about three days. I think that was about 1946 or 1947, somewhere in there. They had a band called the Snake River Outlaws that played. The Wilhelms were quite well known, and a lot of people came and camped [in Swan Lake, for the bar opening]. A lot of people camped right there on the lake. It was in the summer.

Snake River Outlaws . . . I was reading a piece in the paper the other day about them playing at one of the bars on Woody Street (Missoula).

SV: So Eva moved up there (to Swan Lake) with him?

GU: Yes. Babe moved back to the Swan for a couple years after World War II. They lived at Swan Lake in the wintertime, and then went back to their old place (33 Bar Ranch). I guess Burns has it now, or . . . he doesn’t have the main ranch.

SV: Do you remember going to parties at the old house (33 Bar)?

GU: I remember going up with my folks to visit Wilhelms. But I was just a little kid. There weren’t a lot of kids in the Swan. I think there were only about 12 or 13 in grade school. They were pretty scattered out. Kenny Huston and I started first grade together. His older sister Fern was a year or two ahead of Kenny. Those were the kids that we saw most often. They lived closest to us. There were some others, Junior Dunlap. Russ Haasch was still in grade school, 8th grade when I started. Junior Dunlap used to ride his horse. They had an old barn at Smith Flats. He rode a horse all the time. It wasn’t too far from there, from Guest Ranch Road to Smith Flats. They’d come right through on that old road.

SV: When did you first become aware of a difference between summer population and winter?

GU: It was after the war. There would be people who came in the summertime, particularly at Wilhelms, because they ran the dude ranch. One woman, her name was Jane Bassett, came every summer to Wilhelms. She ordered a table and some chairs from my dad. She was from back East somewhere.

SV: So he was building some furniture?
GU: That wasn’t what he wanted to do, he was a carpenter. Basically he learned carpentry work out in Spokane. When he came back, he started contracting. He built Kielman’s house at Holland Lake.

SV: That was about the time the FS was letting leases?

GU: Yes. There were other people, named Bielenberg, that dad built a house for at Holland.

SV: Where did he get the wood?

GU: Wilhelm’s mill.

[End of Tape 1, Side A]
SV: What kind of furniture did your dad make?

GU: He made some rustic stuff. He made tables and chairs primarily. The rustic was out of small lodgepole, and pine. Green wood would shrink, and he complained about that, and the widths of boards then weren’t quite like what you get now. In fact, before he died, I bought him a little band mill. He liked native birch. Somebody sawed some up for him when he first came, and he had it cured. I remember going with him down to Swan Lake with a ton and a half truck and we got some kind of a deal from the Forest Service that they had piled a lot of birch. We picked that up, and he had it sawed up. But he used a lot of pine. I cut some aspen for him, but at that time he couldn’t see very well.

SV: Do you wonder where a lot of his furniture went? Did some of it go out of the valley?

GU: Some of it was sold to the summer homes. Heakins have some. He didn’t build a lot of furniture for sale. He liked to build it, but his main source of income was contracting.

SV: He told me that he built quite a few of the houses at Lindbergh?

GU: Yes. He worked at Lindbergh for a long time. John Stark worked for my dad. I think John built more furniture than my dad. My dad was pretty busy when he was building homes for people. It was only in later years, after he quit building that he went down in his shop and did a lot of (furniture).

John made a lot more than my dad did.

SV: Pete Rude also made furniture didn’t he?

GU: Dad knew Pete Rude. We had a couple pieces of furniture in our house in the Swan that were made by Pete Rude and I think my sister has them now. A dresser and a buffet. They were made out of juniper. Quite pretty.

SV: Did Ed ever say how the juniper was to work with.

GU: I never paid much attention to that. I was never a builder myself.

SV: Tony Koessler insists that Pete Rude didn’t build the furniture in the old lodge at the Gordon Ranch, that there was another builder in the valley at the time.

GU: Earl Woods. Earl worked for my dad. He was a pretty good carpenter and log builder. He built that kind of circular café down at Seeley.
SV: I had read that he’d worked on Camp Paxson...

GU: No doubt he did, yes. He was tall, medium built. Drank a lot. That was one thing that is different now, than back when I was a kid. There was a heck of a lot more drinking. There were many stories about various people drinking. One of them – I knew Martin Kettleson quite well. He was telling me about Charlie Lundberg. When they built the lodge at Holland Lake, they had a big party and lots of booze and hot dogs and food to eat. Babe and Martin were outside talking. Charlie Lundberg came out and he was pretty drunk and he threw up. Martin said some of those hotdogs were only bit in half and Babe said, “We ought to pick them up and fire them at him again.”

SV: Pretty heavy drinking all right.

GU: It was a lot of drinking. I think the whole country has changed in the attitude toward alcohol. In the early fifties, well, after World War II, people celebrated a lot.

SV: Did you know Dick Wilhelm who died in the war?

GU: He was quite a bit older. Maybe the same age as Joe (Wilhelm, Dick’s cousin).

GU: I remember when we were in Bigfork, we were well acquainted with Lee and Marguerite Wilhelm (Dick’s parents) and Dick was leaving for the Navy. That was the summer of ’42 I guess. A lot of people were going into the service. In fact a lot of people from the Swan came down. Babe Wilhelm had a mill out of Bigfork. A lot of people went down and worked for him, Russ Fox went down there with his horses, skidding. Two or three families from the Swan stayed in Bigfork for a little while. We did, too, until we moved to Spokane. We were over there for about a year.

When we came back to Swan Lake, Dad and Roxy Hollopeter had a little mill on Lost Creek. My dad worked there. It was shortly after that he started building houses. He built some houses in Swan Lake. I don’t know who has them now, but I know where they are at.

When we moved to Swan Lake, Babe Wilhelm had bought what was called the rat farm. During the thirties, some outfit – I don’t know if it was the Somers Lumber Company – they fenced off about eighty acres. They had chicken wire, steel posts and a strip of tin on top so the rats couldn’t get out. There was an old building called the Warehouse right along the lakeshore of Swan Lake, and that’s where they sorted out the rats. They sold them live. They had quite a bit of trouble telling which was male and female. Apparently it didn’t pay off.

When I was a kid, my brother and I and Jeff Wilhelm would go out on the Bog (south end of Swan Lake) and you’d find these box traps that they had used to trap muskrat. And the fence was still there. The corner of it was right there, across the road from the Swan Lake Post Office.

Gerald Edwin “Jerry” Underwood Interview, OH 422-208, 209, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
You’d see this wire fence and steel posts running all the way up towards the (old) Swan Lake Ranger Station and back out across the Bog, and down along the lakeshore.

My dad bought a lot (land) from Babe Wilhelm, and part of it was on the old rat farm. Lee Wilhelm built right next to us, a neighbor. Ting Wilhelm had a lot that he never did build on, right next to us on the north side. Babe built a house. I think his house burned down. And he had his bar.

Where we used to live at Swan Lake, I visited the guy that had it. The old house was still there. He said that Lee Wilhelm’s lot sold for $300,000. (chuckles)

There was quite a difference in the type of building my dad did for a living, and the builders such as Matthews Brothers, now. They find clients who are very wealthy and they are building very fancy stuff. My dad built log cabins mainly for people at Lindbergh Lake who were from Missoula or Great Falls, local people. And they wanted a summer home, not a palace. So he didn’t get in on some of the more lucrative building.

SV: Nowadays, we kind of look at people who have cabins on the lake and think, they must be wealthy, but that’s not the kind of families who settled here.

GU: I knew Doc Reynolds, and we became quite good friends. There were a couple university teachers, and Dad built for one of them, I can’t remember his name. _____ Harris, he was from Missoula, he had a car dealership.

SV: So you went to high school in Missoula. What did you do in the summers while in high school?

GU: I worked at the Gordon Ranch. I worked for Dick Hickey at Lindbergh Lake Lodge. I worked one summer for my dad.

SV: So were you haying and . . .

GU: At the Gordon Ranch we mostly put up hay. Plus there were chores to do. I wrangled dudes for Dick Hickey.

SV: Your love of horses finally got put to use.

GU: Yeah.

SV: Tell me about a typical day, wrangling for dudes.

GU: We’d just saddle up the horses, and we’d go for rides. Look at stuff.
SV: Did you worry about people getting hurt?

GU: I didn’t, no. And I never . . . those horses got a lot of use so they were pretty docile. I talked to Dobb Wilhelm, not too long before he died. He had worked at Lindbergh Lake, wrangling dudes when he had gone to high school. He and I compared notes. I did exactly the same thing he did. Get up and saddle a bunch of horses and take people for rides.

SV: It’s not as easy as you make it sound.

GU: Yeah, well, it wasn’t . . . You’d get up and go have breakfast and then saddle up, so the dudes would get up there and get in the saddle. There were two of us working there at Hickeys. We got in contact with one of the dudes who had been at Lindbergh Lake when I was there. We were pretty good friends. He was only a few years older than I was. They went out, and ended up buying a place by Ennis.

SV: Are there any pictures from that era?

GU: I don’t have any. We probably had some.

SV: Loretta (Cooper) may have some.

GU: There was quite a story at Swan Lake. It was right after World War II. Some people by the name of Brissy had bought Covington Lodge at Swan Lake. One of their guests was Virginia Hill, one of the mobsters’ girlfriends. She was quite generous with her tips. My mother worked at Brissy’s, preparing meals and stuff at the lodge. She (not clear who?) took a group of local people on a hunting trip into the South Fork, or Bob Marshall. Apparently a tent caught on fire and some of the guys had to wear — they had lost their coats and stuff — they had to wear manties to keep warm on the way out.

Her boyfriend’s name was Bugsy Seagull.

SV: We’ll have to google her. Did your mom tell stories about cooking up there?

GU: She wasn’t much for reminiscing, not like my dad.

SV: You knew a lot of the oldtimers . . . like Roxy Hollopeter. When did you first get acquainted with him?

GU: When we lived in the Swan. They used to visit back and forth quite a bit, Roxy and his first wife, whose name was Bell. Roxy drove the school bus, which was an old car.

SV: Was he one of those who chewed tobacco and spit it out the window . . .
GU: I didn’t notice (laughs). That chewing fad came much later. People smoked, but they didn’t chew much. Babe Wilhelm chewed, but he was about the only one I knew who really chewed a lot.

SV: Roxy was unpredictable, at least when I tried to interview him…

GU: That’s how he was. What did they call him? Heimer, they called him Heimer when I was a kid.

A good friend of mine, Bud Wilhelm, worked with Roxy up in the Blowdown. He [Roxy] had a little mill up there I guess. Bud worked up there for Roxy. There was some pretty interesting stories there. Bud told me that they had a lot of grizzly bears bother their camp or job. Every night, you know, they’d have to get up and stay in the cookhouse and keep the bears away. One night, Lloyd (or Floyd?) Pilcher – he was from Swan Lake – wanted to stay, take a turn in the cookhouse and keep the bears away. He had a pistol. Apparently the bear came and for some reason Lloyd shot himself in the foot! Bud said they could hear this hopping around and yelling in the cookhouse. They thought sure, a bear had Lloyd (Floyd), but it didn’t.

That was, well, it must have been in the early 1950s, up there.

SV: Roxy told me one time that he really liked that area, and that he spent a lot of time trapping there. Did you ever visit with him much about trapping?

GU: Not much. My dad and Roxy were pretty good friends. You know I don’t recall, he probably ran some traps, but he was not like a lot of trappers, like Fred Messerer (who trapped for a living). Roxy probably trapped a little, but he was mostly woods work, and sawmills.

SV: Do you have any pictures of Hemlock Lookout.

GU: I have been up to Hemlock Lookout, but I don’t have any pictures. In fact when they tore that down, a guy by the name of Byrl Kratzer was working for the Forest Service. He was going to meet me up there. I took a couple pack horses. Roberta and I went up there. Byrl didn’t show up, but he said we could have the copper wire that comes off lookouts, that soft wire, which we packed out for the 4-H club. Then they came in later and took all of that stuff out. They burned some of it.

SV: I remember Cal (Tassinari) telling stories about cleaning up some of the debris.

Did you guys ever hunt much in that area?

GU: We hunted there once, we had camped for three or four days. Didn’t see anything. There were a lot of goats there. Then the guy that hunted that had a hard time finding elk for his hunters so he took them goat hunting. That pretty well depleted the goat population around

Gerald Edwin “Jerry” Underwood Interview, OH 422-208, 209, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
Hemlock Lake. He was from the Guest Ranch, an outfitter. I can’t remember his name. But I know they hunted there, had a camp there, and they’d get goats for their hunters.

SV: So that was a bit change in that area.

GU: There were an awful lot of goats down around Piper.

SV: Did you see any difference in the elk population in your neighborhood?

GU: Yes, it [hunting season] used to open on the west side of the highway on September 15. Cal and I went up Elk Creek and killed elk up there.

SV: Did you ever have trouble with bears?

GU: Not much. We used to have a lot of bears around my dad’s place, because we had a dump. Everybody had a dump, then. You’d hear cans rattling and know there were bears out there. We never had real problems with bears. Treed quite a few of them around there.

SV: When did your folks buy that?

GU: 1950, I think. Very close to that, anyway. I was in high school. Shorty Koessler financed it for us. Koessler treated people who worked for him pretty well, if he liked them. If he thought they did good work. He used to get drunk a lot and was kind of obnoxious.

I’ve heard other stories about him. Koessler did a lot of good things.

SV: He put his money into a lot of community projects.

When did you graduate from high school?

GU: 1952.

SV: So you were on that place [Underwood Ranch]. . what did you think of it?

GU: It was nice. When we were in Columbia Falls high school, I didn’t come home much. But in Missoula, we came home quite a bit. Jeff Wilhelm, my sister and I. Jeff had a car, so we came home a lot.

I did work (in high school). I worked for Val Hopkins’ dad, in a plumbing shop. I did it for my own benefit.

SV: You went in the service in ’54?
GU: Yes, January 1954.

SV: What did you do in between high school and the service?

GU: I worked for my dad some. I got a contract packing a couple of surveyors through the South Fork looking for section corners when they were remapping that area. That was a good summer. Then I taught school, well that was later, when I got out of college. And I worked at Holland Lake Lodge, packing.

SV: Who taught you to pack?

GU: I worked with a guy by the name of Hank Thompson. He worked at Holland Lake Lodge, and he had worked at the Gordon Ranch as a packer. He had a camp in on Shaw Creek, and we took that in and set it up and had hunters in there. He also had another camp down at the mouth of Gordon Creek. I was at the camp at Shaw Creek, and Hank was at the mouth of Gordon Creek.

We didn’t have a lot of hunters. We usually had a couple. Emma Kopra was the cook. She cooked that fall that I was in there.

SV: Boy that’s a name that goes way back. That would have been Andy’s first wife. And she cooked back there? She had some kind of health problems.

GU: She had a bad eye, and I don’t know what else, but later, she had serious... I liked Emma. She was a good cook. A fun person to be around. She was a good hand.

SV: What was hunting like in the fifties?

GU: It wasn’t good. Well, it was a very dry fall, very nice like this, when I was there. I think we got two elk or so. There wasn’t a lot of elk. There was a lot of hunting, but not a lot of shooting. I think it was better in later years. I used to go in and camp...

[End of Tape 1, Side B]

Continued from digital:

... in Albino Creek and hunt. I’d go up over Pendant, and over in (or down?) Tango Creek. I was on that Tango Creek fire for about eleven days. That was in 1953. Compared to fires today, it was a small fire, between three and four hundred acres. They had a lot of pickup crews, and they walked them in. They had quite a camp set up. They had close to three hundred men in there for awhile. The first night I went up there I was packing hay. Ray Gardner was the ranger. I had gone up to see if I could hire out my horses...
JU: . . . hire out my horses for myself. They hired me and I had five head. Saddle horses and packstock. We had to wait quite a while when we went in. There was a couple pack strings ahead of me. And the Forest Service was dropping sleeping bags from one of those TriMotor Fords (for the pickup firefighters). They looked like they were going to fall out of the air. They’d fly over and dump out a bunch of stuff.

That was when they had the Remount, came out of Ninemile. I think they had four or five strings. All of the outfitters were in there packing for the Forest Service. It paid them much better than their dude business.

SV: Is that the first fire you remember going on?

GU: There was another small fire up Cooney Basin. They used to hire a lot of local people. They’d go down and round up crews in Missoula and bring them out here.

SV: I heard somewhere that they’d look at your shoes.

GU: Yeah, they did. (Interruption)

SV: Tell me more about Fred Herrick.

GU: He was pretty old when I knew him. Very polite. He was Southern.

SV: Were there two Fred Herricks?

GU: Not that I knew of.

SV: There was a Fred Herrick that came over with Cap Laird, is that the same Fred Herrick?

GU: I don’t know where he came from. He was in the Swan, and he also worked with Taylor . . . (the early surveyor).

SV: Did he tell you stories about the early surveys?

GU: No. Oscar Southern was around when I was a kid.

SV: Did any of those guys talk about the Indian massacre?

GU: No I think most of them came to the Swan later than that. The Gordon Ranch was about the only place that was there (in 1908). Martin Kettleson was fun to listen to. He homesteaded where the Guest Ranch (Girls School) is now. Then he was a manager out at the Gordon Ranch.
I don’t know what all they were doing.

SV: What did Fred Herrick look like?

GU: Seems to me he was about medium sized. I would have a hard time describing him, now. He was a bachelor, and so was Oscar Southern. There were quite a few bachelors, especially around Salmon Prairie, there were a bunch of them. Three Foxes . . .

SV: Herrick Run must have been named for Fred Herrick, did he ever talk about that?

GU: No. That Herrick Run wasn’t named (until later). People started talking about it after the Blowdown.

SV: Were you guys in the Swan when that storm hit? (December 1949 Blowdown)

GU: Yes, in Swan Lake. It blew the roof off the hotel in Polson. There was some huge, old spruce timber that came out of that Blowdown (in the logging that followed near Meadow Bunyan west of Lindbergh Lake.) I think that wind took everything . . . It was kind of unusual because it was just a wide swath off the top of the ridge down to the lake.

SV: One thing I wanted to visit about before I leave here is the facility up at Goat Creek. I remember going up there one time for the *Pathfinder* about something that was going on there. How did you get involved with that camp? Do you remember how it started?

GU: Gary Moon was the State Forester. I was working for the Employment Service in Kalispell. One of my duties was to recruit juvenile delinquents for a Neighborhood youth Program which the State Forestry ran. And then I became acquainted with Gary Moon and various foresters. When they opened the Forestry Camp, I interviewed for the Superintendent’s job. I didn’t get it, but they offered me the Assistant’s job. I felt that I’d like to be back in the Swan, so that’s how I happened to come to work for the Department of Corrections.

SV: What was your degree in?

GU: General. I just skimmed through. I taught for three years, in Great Falls, Bozeman, and one year out in Oregon. I taught junior high, and a year at Oregon was in a small high school.

SV: So you had this background working with young people.

GU: I didn’t like teaching at all. (laughs) It wasn’t my thing at all. My work at the Employment Service put me in touch with the Forestry and I knew about the camp. Gary Moon was one of the forces behind it. Forestry Camps had become one of the ways that they thought they could rehabilitate young offenders, particularly juveniles.
SV: Did they build that camp from scratch?

GU: It was brand new. It is very nice. The gymnasium was built later, it was only there the last three or four years I worked there. I started in 1968 and I retired in 1989. (He ended up being Director for the last three years.)

SV: Did you enjoy the work?

GU: It was a good place to work. I was never one to like paperwork, administrative work. I did a lot of it. At the same time you could get out of the office and do a lot of different things.

SV: Was it juveniles the whole time you were there?

GU: There were juveniles, probably three or four years. Then they started getting direct commitments from the courts. They had quite a flap over that. A judge in Great Falls committed an inmate who was actually an escapee from Washington. They sent him to Swan River. So there was quite a flap over that. The prison (at Deer Lodge) became quite crowded. So, they mixed juveniles and adults for a while. But that is not acceptable. Then they went all . . . [adults] from the prison. The name was Swan River Youth Forest Camp, and then they changed it to Swan River Forest Camp when there were no more youth there.

SV: Did the juveniles get to go out and work?

GU: Yes. The State has about 40,000 acres. The State Forestry provided the work program, and we provided care and custody of the juveniles and the adults. They would go out and do thinning, and plant trees. Whatever the Forestry wanted. They did a lot of thinning, mostly with chainsaws.

SV: Did they have ways of evaluating the success?

GU: Yes, they kept track of the recidivism rate. It was quite good compared to the prison. Of course, we got the ones who were more likely to be rehabilitated and not come back to the prison. I think the eventual closing was caused because to run the program – if you had an inmate who didn’t want to do what was expected of him, we could send him back to the joint. So it was quite a difficult time to transfer back and forth. Unless you had that lever, the inmates were not particularly cooperative. So, in the Corrections, it’s like everybody is reinventing the wheel. Forestry Camps came along, then Boot Camps, and I expect one day they’ll have Forestry Camps again. They are always trying to find a way to be more successful in reducing the recidivism rate of inmates.

SV: But there was a lot of work to be done in the woods.

Gerald Edwin “Jerry” Underwood Interview, OH 422-208, 209, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
GU: It was very good work. We had a carpentry shop and a sawmill, and a mechanics shop.

SV: How many employees?

GU: From twenty to twenty-five depending on the generosity of the Legislature. Yes, it was a good steady work place. It didn’t pay a whole lot for the people who worked there. Mostly full-time. We had one half-time, for a while. We always had a half-time night security. Then we had part-time cooks, for fill-in.

SV: You retired before the real controversy started? [Employee Donna Weeks was nearly killed by an inmate who strangled her. I can’t remember what year.]

GU: Yes. That should have never happened, in my estimation, but I wasn’t there. Don Guizzo was there, and he knows. He was there that night. The secretary had worked there when I was there, Donna Weeks. They didn’t have trustees doing work when I was there. Apparently it didn’t work out. I forget the name of the Corrections director. But he replaced the cooks and maintenance crews with Trustees. And of course one of the trustees almost killed Donna Weeks, and killed that other inmate over in Polson.

I don’t think it would have happened when I was there. I don’t know why Donna Weeks was there at night. That was just unusual. We did have staff, and we did have female staff who stayed over occasionally. But we didn’t have anybody who lived in . . . where they had a couple three rooms in the administration building. We never had any women inmates.

SV: Did you have a problem with escapees.

GU: It was minimum security, so you’re going to have escapees. There was only one incident that I know of, and we had three inmates escape. They abducted a girl at Joe’s Smoke Ring and raped her several times. A priest disappeared that night, although I don’t think there was any connection. But we had three pretty weird inmates who should never have been at the camp. But it takes something like that to make everybody well aware of what they need to do and what they shouldn’t do. And it was after that, that if we had trouble with inmates we didn’t fool with them there. We sent them back to the prison. (Authorities caught the three who escaped.)

SV: So when did you move back to the home place then?

GU: In 1968, and I lived in the cabin that you folks rented for a number of years. [Suzanne and Sheldon Vernon rented the cabin from Jerry in 1998-1999.] It was hard to get a loan to build in the Swan, then. I got a VA loan, and they would only do a VA loan if you couldn’t get a commercial loan from a bank otherwise. But you couldn’t get a particularly large loan. I think $25,000 was the most you could get.

SV: But you had a permanent job?
GU: Yes, but the banks didn’t loan in the Swan then. I don’t know why. Too much risk maybe.

SV: So you were there when Prang got lost? (Lost hiker in the Mission Mountains who was never found.)

GU: Yes, I looked for him. Well there was myself, and Dick Hickey and John Stark for the first day. We went up to Crystal Lake and hiked around. I hiked up in the southside of Crystal Lake and looked around. We didn’t see any sign of him. Then we took horses into Turquoise a couple different days. Nobody found anything.

SV: Did they get a more organized search at any point?

GU: The first day was kind of disorganized, as I said, there was John Stark, Dick Hickey and myself. I think there were a couple others who hiked in there. We took out on our own to go up to Turquoise and look. John Matthews went with us. My brother and I went up to Turquoise and looked around.

SV: Herb Styler tells of seeing several grizzly bears while he was searching...

GU: We didn’t see any, when we went up to Crystal or to Turquoise. More people would have gone to Turquoise because there was a trail. Crystal was pretty easy, too. We took a boat up to the lake [to ferry people across the lake].

SV: Did you hear any rumors about what might have happened to him [Prang]?

GU: Oh yeah. Mostly people thought that this guy had gone in there and got lost or got hurt or something, and just didn’t come out.

SV: Nobody suspected foul play?

GU: I never heard anything like that.

SV: Did you ever hear of other people lost in the Missions that didn’t come out?

GU: Not that I know of. Other people had gotten lost, and came out.

SV: Were you pretty familiar with the Missions from hunting and fishing in there?

GU: We went to Hemlock, Turquoise. My dad and I made a trip from up Elk Creek and down out at North Hemlock. There was a trail but they weren’t used. We came out of the head of Crazy Horse and down. There was a trail there. But they never cleaned out those trails. Well, Tassinari (Wilderness Ranger) didn’t want those trails cleared out.
SV: Did you ever remember anyone telling a story about an Indian camp and facility built out of logs in Crazy Horse.

GU: Nope. I never heard of it. I’ve been up Crazy Horse hunting a couple of times, but I wasn’t really familiar with that.

SV: Did you guys ever find anything like arrowheads and tipi rings on the ranch?

GU: Not there, but when I was a kid at Swan Lake we found a lot of arrowheads at the upper end of the lake, a lot of pieces of flint. I think they camped at the upper end of Swan Lake, at the inlet. Wave action would erode right along the edge of the water, so if you walked along the edge of the water you’d find flint. A lot of them were small. I found one that was quite nice. I still have that flint around someplace.

SV: The early maps show that was an Indian camp area.

GU: I think I heard that Hudson Bay had a cabin on Barber Creek. I don’t know when it would have been, but it would have been quite early. Just said it was on Barber Creek. John Matthews talked about it. I don’t know where he heard it.

SV: Did John Matthews trap?

GU: He didn’t trap (full time). I think he was raised around Ovando someplace. I don’t think his dad was a trapper. I don’t think John trapped much. He worked for Lee and Percy at the mill, and I guess he got on with the State. When I first met him, I was staying at Babe Wilhelm’s place, right after World War II, when he had just gotten out of the Navy. Dobb Wilhelm had just been discharged. A lot of them were coming home.

SV: There was a population increase in the 1950s.

GU: Yep, a lot of people moved in . . . I think when my kids started grade school, there were about eighty kids in the school. [mid to late 1960s] It was pretty good sized. (Now they are down to ______.) There were a lot of kids then. My mother was the clerk of the district for years. She liked the job. She and Marguerite Wilhelm were close friends.

SV: Did Marguerite ever talk about teaching at the Roll School?

GU: Yep. There was a story that she was to meet Lee Wilhelm before . . . he was working up around Holland Lake, and she rode with the mail carrier and he let her off at the Holland Lake mailbox, which was right close to the Gordon Ranch. And she set there for several hours waiting for Lee to show up. He probably got an ear full when he got there. They were neighbors to us at Swan Lake for years.
SV: How would you describe the community up there?

GU: Everybody knew a lot about their neighbors because, for instance, if you saw a car you knew who it was. They visited back and forth a lot. There wasn’t television. They’d listen to the radio. We went several times, we’d go someplace and eat and visit for several hours and then go home. People would come to our place. I think you knew most of the people in the community, although there are some that I never knew. Just never crossed paths. Like Kestersons, I never knew them very well. And then Miller, he lives up here (Potomac) I never knew him or his family. Reuben Kauffman worked with my dad a lot, for several years.

SV: Gloria Busch told me that it was your dad who made the first log home that was built off-site, designed to be moved on-site.

GU: They built one for Stones, down here, at the E Bar L Ranch (Greenough). They built it up at our place and then moved it down. And they built some others that way.

SV: So they actually did do that. Gloria didn’t know, about the one that was next to the Hungry Bear. (June Ash lives in this cabin, on Dog Creek. It was moved from next to the Hungry Bear to Ash’s property in the 1950s or 1960s, by Frank and Marilyn Rose.)

GU: Dad and Lee Wilhelm put that one up. They tried two different houses, that little log cabin, and that A-frame (north of the Hungry Bear). Lee decided he’d keep the log cabin because it was on his land, and my dad had the A-Frame, so he sold it and put it up down where it is now (north of the Hungry Bear along Highway 83).

SV: We were trying to figure out who was the first log-home builder.

GU: Well, the Finns built a lot of log houses.

My Dad knew a guy by the name of Maki who made quite a bit. I think my dad went down and learned some from Jalmar Maki.

SV: Maki apparently knew all the handtools . . .

GU: How to scribe the logs and stuff.

(Log styles discussion, brief and tape ends.)

[End of Tape 2, Side A]
Discussion about the main house at the Underwood Ranch...

SV: Part of that house was the old original homestead, wasn’t it?

GU: It was one of the older buildings. Babe Wilhelm built the two story part (the log addition).

SV: The lodge part?

GU: Yes. But it didn’t have much foundation under it. Some of the joists had rotted out under part of it. But it was an attractive building.

SV: So they didn’t put a root cellar or anything under it? Of course, where would they have gotten cement?

GU: That was one of the problems with the older buildings in the Swan, they didn’t have foundations. People didn’t have the means to pour concrete. They were mostly set on rocks and whatever else they could find.

SV: At the ranch, did your family do anything different with the pond, as far as enlarging it?

GU: We had to rebuild it, the dam. Where the old generator was, was a log crib with pretty good sized logs and they were starting to rot out. So we drained the pond and rebuilt the dam and it was made a little bit larger, not a whole lot, but deeper. Maybe the level was up a foot or so.

SV: Did you use it for irrigation?

GU: We had an old gasoline engine and some sprinkler pipe out there, which was a pain in the neck. A lot of work. You’d go down and start that engine, and let it run for six or seven hours, and then you had to move that pipe by hand. That ground in the Swan is not farm ground.

SV: The Natives over in the Mission Valley evidently camped in that area, the Pend Oreilles. Were there fish in there?

GU: There were fish in that creek. It rose not far from that cabin, the spring came up. Then Lundberg built a pond.

SV: Bud Wolff told us that he worked on that pond. Did anybody else?

GU: I don’t remember. They probably did a lot of work themselves.
Continued on digital . . .

(Surveyor discussion)

GU: Not many people that I knew had been living in the Swan in 1908. Most of the Swan was surveyed in 1916 or 1917. When I packed the surveyors through the South Fork they had all the old notes. They were trying to pinpoint section corners in various townships and see how they matched up. Where we could find the section corners were where they had overlays on air photos that said they were where they should be. The old surveyors were pretty accurate. Their notes talked about them having a helluva time with mosquitoes.

SV: How hard was it to leave the ranch in the Swan?

GU: You know, it was a good time when I was there, but I like it here.

SV: You have seen a lot of changes in the Swan.

GU: The biggest change up there was the highway.

[End of Interview]